

Giorgio Napolitano's legacy

Judith Harris (April 14, 2013)



On April 15 a joint session of Parliament, flanked by a delegation of members of regional assemblies, meets to begin the process of electing a successor to Giorgio Napolitano, 86, President of Italy for the past seven years. A year after he was appointed life Senator in 2005 by the then President, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, he succeeded Ciampi, taking office on May 10, 2006. His presidency culminates a fascinating career that spans nearly seventy years of Italian politics. Few would disagree that he has been an outstanding president and a figure of national pride. Especially during the past five years of economic crisis as challenging as the Great Depression of the Thirties, his fair-mindedness and the force of his personality have helped to bind Italy together.

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Now 86, Napolitano was born in Naples on June 29, 1925, and came of political age during World War II, when he joined an anti-Fascist youth group and then the Italian Communist party in 1945. By the Seventies, he headed the reformist wing of the Italian Communist party (PCI) headed by Enrico Berlinguer. These were the years when the PCI was striking out on its own from Moscow. Indeed, Moscow was less than happy with the independent-minded Italian Communists. When Napolitano's fellow party member Giancarlo Pajetta was to speak for the PCI at the usual world summit of Soviet Communist parties, the Moscow authorities allowed him to speak only in an out-of-the-way gymnasium where few were likely to hear him and risk being contaminated by the Italian renegades. By 1975 Napolitano was already persona grata at the U.S. Embassy in Rome, as this reporter can attest. That same year the historian Eric Hobsbawm interviewed him about the party he represented for *Intervista sul PCI*, translated into ten languages. Napolitano himself has written eleven books, including his political autobiography *Dal PCI al socialismo europeo* (From the PCI to European Socialism).

Faced with the political three-way split, he has tried to find points in common that might ease the way to formation of a government. When the parties continued to balk, his final act as president was to nominate ten so-called "sages" or experts holding a variety of diverse political points of view. Their brief was to excogitate a series of program measures upon which the squabbling political parties could in theory agree - though their first act was to protest that among the wise men he had failed to include at least one token woman.

Like that quarrel, their conclusions, following ten days of meetings and sober debate, will probably leave few traces, but for the record their suggestions included these: (1) the public financing of political parties remains useful and necessary, and is "uneliminable" (!); (2) the justification for judiciary phone taps must be a "search for evidence, not for a crime"; (3) a new election law should replace the present discredited law, but should continue to include a bounty of freebie deputies for the party receiving a relative majority of votes; (4) the number of MPs should be slashed from 630 to 480, and senators, from 315 to 120. The need for bureaucratic reform, for official registration of lobbies, for a review court over the Consiglio Superiore della Magistratura, for refinancing of an unemployment benefit program, and for a conflict-of-interest law were also discussed.

In theory the powers of the Italian President are limited to dissolving Parliament and to appointing possible candidates to put together a future possible government. Whereas many politicians complain at this, wishing for a stronger presidency, this is a healthy Italian version maintaining a balance of powers. To see a video of his thanking the "sages" for their contribution [>>>](#) [2]

As for his successor, little is clear yet. Names bruited about include those of two women, Emma Bonino and Milena Gabanelli, constitutionalist Stefano Rodota, the Berlusconi sidekick Gianni Leta, and Beppe Grillo himself. Pier Luigi Bersani may also be in the running. Grillo's Movimento 5 Stelle made news when its much-touted on-line vote for candidates was reportedly hacked and the election polling had to be repeated.

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